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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000245

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SUBJECT: GABON: REGIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS

REF: LIBREVILLE 0211

Classified By: Ambassador Eunice Reddick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Gabon is concerned about the future of the MICOPAX peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic, maritime security, potential Hezbollah activity in West and Central Africa, and other issues, Defense Minister Ali Bongo Ondimba told the Ambassador in a wide-ranging conversation. End Summary.

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Tour d'Horizon  
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¶2. (C) Still suffering from an intestinal condition that left him recently hospitalized (septel), Gabonese Defense Bongo offered the Ambassador a broad overview of Gabonese security concerns in an hour-long meeting at his home May 30. Bongo's comments on upcoming elections in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), and potential infiltration of Sao Tome and Principe by Niger Delta militants, are reported separately. Ali Bongo, whose father President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba is seriously ill in a Spanish hospital, is a leading contender in the ongoing behind-the-scenes scramble for succession. Since becoming defense minister in 1999, he has assiduously sought better relations with the United States, China and other powers as a counterweight to Gabon's strong but sometimes testy military relationship with France.

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Hezbollah Threat?  
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¶3. (C) Ali Bongo, who often deputizes for his father as head of Gabon's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs expressed concern about possible support for Hezbollah by Gabon-based ethnic Lebanese. The Lebanese community in Gabon has "changed from twenty years ago," he said. The first Lebanese in Gabon were Christian, Ali Bongo recalled. At present, however, the community is predominantly Shiite and there are elements within it sympathetic to Hezbollah. Ali Bongo said he would welcome closer cooperation with the United States to better understand the nature of the Hezbollah presence and threat in West and Central Africa.

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MICOPAX  
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¶4. (C) Gabon had been expected to withdraw its 120-person

contingent in the MICOPAX peacekeeping force in the Central African Republic (CAR) later this summer, Bongo said, but it would not do so in the current situation. "We have no other solution but to stay," Bongo said. Gabon led the small peacekeeping operation from its inception in December 2002 to July 2008, when command passed to a military officer from the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, or CEEAC in its French acronym).

15. (C) Gabon has worked hard to promote political reconciliation in CAR, Ali Bongo continued, but some elements there are still tempted to "follow the example of President Bozize" and seize power in a coup. Bozize has proved obdurate in negotiating with his adversaries, Bongo lamented. Bozize should "get serious about dialogue," Bongo said. However, some of Bozize's adversaries are also "not willing to come to the table," Bongo commented. He urged the United States and other international players to continue to "signal that there will not be a military solution."

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Maritime Issues  
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16. (C) Gabon has joined its neighbors Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe (STP) in an initiative to better coordinate maritime security strategy, Bongo said. Operating as CEEAC's maritime "Zone D", the four countries were at the very earliest stages of cooperation, Bongo said. Nevertheless, he argued, you have to start somewhere. West and Central Africa already have problems with piracy,

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maritime banditry and the drug trade. Unless there is effective and concerted regional action, he said, these problems will only get worse.

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Comment  
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17. (C) It was refreshing that the Defense Minister took time in the midst of political drama created by his father's illness to provide a workmanlike and generally astute review of several regional security issues. Gabon's ability to engage effectively on these issues, however, will be uncertain until current political questions are resolved.  
End Comment.  
REDDICK